

Neighbors

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Iceland owner Bill Kerth stands amid skaters.

After 50 years, rink still city's ice-skating isle

By Patty Henetz
Neighbors staff writer

It was lucky for the first William J. Kerth that he struck water when he sank a deep well beneath the American Ice Company on Del Paso Boulevard back in the 1920s.

The vast supply of well water gave him the idea that he could open an ice-skating rink, which he did in 1940. And the water may have given his rink, christened Iceland, the competitive edge in an industry that has steadily declined over the decades.

Iceland, now the only ice rink in the entire Sacramento region, is in its 50th year.

The anniversary celebration schedule has yet to be nailed down, said the second William Kerth, who took over Iceland after his father's death in 1947.

But so far, Kerth said, there are plans for a gratis night this winter for all the people who got married after meeting at Iceland. "I can think of



Randy Allen/Neighbors

Iceland's glass blocks and neon sign have been a familiar sight on Del Paso Boulevard for half a century.

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at least 150 of them," he said.

Kerth also said he expects the Capital City Figure Skaters, whose own 50th anniversary is coming up in 1991, will arrange a couple of choreographed ice shows for the anniversary.

But perhaps most of all, Kerth said, he wants to revive the kind of local interest in ice skating that in the late 1950s brought 5,000 kids each week to Iceland from the San Juan school district for group lessons.

"Private coaching has made figure skating training so expensive that future competitors are being chosen on the basis of wealth," he said. "And that's not right."

As he talked, Kerth made it clear that the story of Iceland's 50 years is inextricably tied to his own life story.

Born just one year before his father founded the American Ice Co., Kerth has built his eclectic professional life around ice — a tough row to hoe for a flatlander.

"It was difficult being an ice

'It was difficult being an ice expert from Sacramento. This is hot country.'

— William Kerth,
Iceland owner

expert from Sacramento. This is hot country," he said. "The reason I can do that is because I was born and raised in an ice plant."

Kerth went into the Navy after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and served as an engineering officer in the Pacific during World War II. While he was away, Iceland's business was pumped up by the servicemen in town who couldn't get to the Sierra for winter sports because gas was rationed and everyone had been required to give up their spare tires.

So, Kerth said, people stayed close to home and went to Iceland, which had been designated a wartime emergency morgue and whose Art Deco glass block walls were terribly difficult to mask during blackouts.

Kerth took over Iceland in 1947 after his father's death, and immediately began to put his engineer-

ing expertise and intellectual curiosity to work as he analyzed ice skating from every angle he could think of.

He wondered, for example, why people danced to music when they roller-skated but not when they ice-skated. He concluded that to dance, skaters need visceral percussion — produced when hard rubber wheels hit wood but not when steel blades cut ice — and built a radical type of speaker that produced undistorted bass tones too low to be audible but which could actually be felt physically.

When he set up that sound system, still operating in his ice palace, the rhythms grabbed people right in the belly, he said. They danced to the music.

Kerth also designed and built the first artificial speed skating course for the 1960 Squaw Valley

Winter Olympics, played a significant role in getting the luge competition included in the Olympics and now is working on a snow- and ice-making scheme that he says will bring year-round skiing and an artificial ice rink to the top of Squaw Mountain.

Currently, Kerth is putting his analytic skills to work on another of his life loves, teaching. He is writing a book on his techniques, honed from years of study of kinesiology and psychology as well as years of teaching blind, deaf and mentally ill children to skate.

He hasn't, however, been able to figure out why more Sacramentans don't come to Iceland, where the indoor temperature invites comparisons to Reykjavik, for their aerobic exercise during the brutal heat of the summer. For some reason, people wait until it is cold and rainy to break out their skates, he said.

Kerth said he would like to build another ice rink in Sacramento, and turn Iceland into a teaching center where kids could learn to skate as part of their physical education curriculum.

The instruction would be serious, he said, but not as serious as the training reflected in the faces of Eastern bloc competitors. Just last month, Soviet skaters in town as line dancers for an ice-dancing show at Arco Arena practiced for four days at Iceland. They never smiled, Kerth said, probably because of the Soviet security types standing out on Del Paso Boulevard waiting to escort them to their next destination.

Iceland is being considered for status as a historical site, Kerth said, a thought that gave him pause. "In 50 years, there have been a lot of people through here," he said. "It's hard to believe it's been that long."